

# MOVING IN TO SOCIAL HOUSING AND THE DYNAMICS OF DIFFERENCE 'NEIGHBOURS FROM HELL' WITH NOTHING TO LOSE?

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## *Abstract*

*This article reports on a single case study of anti-social behaviour focused on a household with a severely disabled child. The case is presented as an analysis of the experience of the adult member of the household targeted, who provided detailed documentation to support her verbal account of the experience of the victimisation of her family. The case has been the subject of a great deal of media coverage, as well as an independent Home Office review. Comparisons are made with the Pilkington case, in which a mother killed herself and her disabled daughter, following years of being the target of anti-social behaviour.*

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## Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing concern about anti-social behaviour (ASB) in areas of social housing. Social housing has become a residual tenure in Britain, declining from 31% of households in 1980 to 17% in 2010; this residualization is dynamically connected to the development of concerns about ASB. Indeed social landlords were instrumental in the development of legislation to do with ASB (Crawford, 2009). Within this broader picture of highly problematic behaviour is a concentration of potential vulnerability: for example there are proportionately more single parent households and people over the age of 60 years living in social housing. There is also a heavy concentration of adults in receipt of housing benefit: 63% of households in 2010-2011 (compared with 25% in privately rented housing) (DCLG, 2012). It follows that nearly half (46.4%) of social housing is located in the 10% most deprived areas in Britain (DCLG, 2011a). Children and young people are proportionately more numerous in social housing estates, as a result of policies that have progressively prioritised families over those without children (Coles *et al*, 2000). Current policy is set to further accentuate the concentration of vulnerability and disadvantage in social housing, through changes to new tenancy agreements, which in essence will make it possible to remove the right to stay in social housing if your circumstances improve (H M Government, 2011; LGA, 2012). In sum, there is a connection between poverty, worklessness, vulnerability and access to social housing which means that particularly disadvantaged groups are concentrated in a locality with more children and young people (compared with private renting or owner-occupancy). Moreover, it has been argued that social housing has become a site of crime control *because* it has become a residual tenure for marginalized groups (Brown, 2004, p.1).

Social housing, as a residual tenure, is often beset by negative perceptions. The connection between perceptions of social cohesion and levels of ASB shows a social gradient or patterning in the British Crime Survey, BCS (see for example Scribbins *et al*, 2010). Broadly speaking it is the poorest areas that have the lowest levels of social cohesion and highest levels of ASB. Twigg *et al* (2010) have also found, when modelling BCS data using indices of deprivation and area classifications, that neighbourhood deprivation is an important driver of negative perceptions of one's local community. Negative perceptions of an area and lack of social cohesion provide a setting in which ASB (often perpetrated by a minority) can thrive. This situation is not inevitable; one of the ways of improving an area is to get residents involved in positive change: for example, supporting each other and through participating in conflict resolution (see for example, ACPO/Home Office, 2012).

This article is based on a single case study that is used to illuminate the lived experience of a female single parent family with two children (one profoundly disabled) who moved into social housing in 2006. The family was re-housed in 2011, following years of abuse from neighbours that led to a suicide attempt by one of the children and an independent investigation into the case by the Home Office. 'Difference' has two main connotations in this story. Firstly, the mother, Asher, and her two children were newcomers to both social housing and the particular estate ('not one of us'). Asher had been better off financially prior to divorce and had a different outlook, life experience and expectations from those around her. Secondly, difference relates to the disability of one of her children and the way that this was perceived in relation to the help she received. One of Asher's sons is profoundly disabled with Cerebral Palsy and is unable to walk unaided. He needs carers and adaptations to his

home in order to be able to live with his family. His disability meant that there were additional vulnerabilities and stresses for the family in relation to this targeted ASB.

Within the first few weeks of their arrival on the estate Asher challenged the behaviour of local children in her garden and around her home. Furthermore, she sought help quickly from local agencies in relation to this behaviour. With the support of other neighbours on the estate, Asher was involved in giving evidence that led to the eviction of her next door neighbour. The eviction happened within ten months of her arrival on the estate. However, this eviction did not solve the ASB targeted at her family; it was just the start of years of abuse, culminating in Asher and her family moving home.

The disability of Asher's son is an important part of the story, both because this meant the house was adapted and refurbished and she had carers for her son; and, because of the costly adaptations she could not move to other accommodation easily. Comparison is made in this article between the current case and that of Pilkington (see below) which ended in two deaths. Flyvberg (2006) argues that the knowledge of well chosen individual cases can help in the understanding of a phenomenon by providing a nuanced view of reality. Experts, it is argued, often operate on the basis of knowledge gained through being involved in case studies and case studies are crucial to human learning. A great deal has been written about ASB, much of it critical of policy and how we came to focus on this issue. Cases of protracted victimisation are often referred to in relation to the powers used to address ASB (see for example Burney, 2005, pp.111-113). However, the additional issues and stresses to do with disability within a victimised household have had less coverage.

### **Comparison with the Pilkington case**

Fiona Pilkington killed herself and her 18-year-old daughter Francesca, who had learning disabilities, in October 2007, following more than 10 years as victims of anti-social behaviour. Pilkington parked her car in a lay-by, doused it in petrol and set it alight. The IPCC (2011) report on the case details over 30 incidents reported to the police and numerous opportunities to intervene. Key to the lack of effective police intervention was a failure to recognise the vulnerability of the family and the difference between general ASB in the area and the targeted ASB to which this family was subjected. The IPCC (2011) investigation also concluded that '*incidents were too often dealt with by police officers in isolation and with an unstructured approach* (para 2).' However, this issue is not just about policing: a jury concluded that the response of Leicestershire police, Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council and Leicestershire County Council's adult social services department all contributed to Pilkington's decision to kill herself and her daughter (Samuel, 2009, Para 6).

The Serious Case Review, and other writing on the Pilkington case, uses the terms 'anti-social behaviour', 'bullying' and 'hate crime' inter-changeably: key to these various concepts are three important characteristics of the Pilkington case, as well as the case reported in this article. Firstly, the power imbalance between perpetrators and victims is typical of all three concepts (see for example Hall and Hayden, 2007; Millie and Moore, 2011). Secondly, repetition is characteristic of both bullying and anti-social behaviour (Millie and Moore, 2011), although these behaviours are not always criminal and individual victimisations are sometimes minor. Thirdly, the targeting of difference is key to the definitions of both bullying and hate crime (Hall and Hayden, 2007) but is less discussed in relation to ASB. Numerous powers and initiatives have been developed in relation to ASB and hate crime; and, bullying behaviour receives a great deal of attention in schools. The case that informs this

article shares some of the characteristics of bullying and hate crime, although it was officially recognised as ASB. Some of the victimisations suffered were clearly criminal, including assault and criminal damage.

A key issue in the Pilkington case and current case study is the cumulative effects of ASB. Many of the individual behaviours experienced as anti-social, may not raise much concern, so incident driven recording and poor communication and understanding of these issues can mean that their impact on victims is misunderstood and underestimated. According to experts:

A distinctive feature of ASB is that it constitutes acts and conduct that have cumulative effects. The collective impact derives from the repetitive and persistent nature of incidents and the manner in which a series of small scale acts compound each other to register far greater significance (Crawford, 2009, p.3).

As noted above, accepted definitions of bullying also highlight repetition as one of the key characteristics of this type of behaviour:

...bullying can be seen as a form of aggressive behaviour that is deliberately hurtful, repeated over time and typically happens in situations where it is difficult for a victim to defend themselves [it is] a systematic abuse of power (Smith, 2002, p.117).

Some of the individual behaviours characteristic of bullying, such as name calling and abusive language, can seem quite minor when looked at in isolation and dismissed as 'teasing'.

There has been a great deal of debate about the vagueness of the ASB term and the way it can be misused (see for example Burney, 2005; Crawford, 2009; Mackenzie *et al*, 2010; Squires, 2008). We do not review that debate here, however, since it is an issue beyond the focused aims of this article. Often ASB is perceived as a general problem in an area that is not always targeted at individuals (as is the case here). Policy relevant concerns have been raised in relation to 'nuisance neighbours' but soon began to focus most on the activities of young people (Hodgkinson and Tilley, 2007). The current case illustrates how these two issues sometimes combine, when the ASB of children and young people is actively supported by a powerful extended family that is long established in an area. There are numerous ASB-related powers and tools (see Crawford, 2009) with new ideas and initiatives announced regularly (DCLG, 2011b; ACPO/Home Office, 2012). Contemporary proposals look rather like a re-branding of responses that are still based primarily on orders and evictions and moving 'the problem' on to somewhere else. However, the increased recognition of the need for better recording and linking of incidents is promising (see ACPO/Home Office, 2012).

Hate Crime is another way of conceptualising some types of ASB and brings with it other powers of response. Hate Crime has been particularly well recognised in Britain since the publication of Sir William Macpherson's inquiry into the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993 (Macpherson, 1999). Specific legislation outlaws offences motivated by racial and religious hatred, and offences aggravated by homophobia and disability bias. ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) and the CPS (Crown Prosecution Service) define a hate crime or incident as:

.....any crime or incident where the perpetrator's hostility or prejudice against an identifiable group of people is a factor in determining who is victimised (H M Government, 2009, p.54).

There is no specific law against disability hate crime; although the Criminal Justice Act 2003 contains provisions for increases of sentence upon conviction if the court is satisfied that disability bias was present at the commission of the offence. The policy of Leicestershire police on hate crime did not mention disability as a possible spur for abuse until it was rewritten after the Pilkington case. A similar lack of awareness pervades public opinion, according to Scope (1). Scope likens the situation to the general ignorance of race hate crime before Stephen Lawrence's death (Williams, 2009). An enquiry by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2011) into the cause of disability-related harassment and the response of public bodies, reviews a range of laws and powers that are already available. The preferred term of this inquiry is 'harassment'; the concept of 'hate crime' is viewed as problematic for the victim:

...the language of 'hate crime' has been useful up until now, to get the issues on the radar, but it probably now acts as a barrier to effective reporting and recognition. Many people think they have just been taken advantage of, rather than hated. Who wants to think of themselves as hated? This terminology also probably contributes to the culture of disbelief. Language may not be the most important thing in the world – action counts for more – but it's probably time to use a new Terminology (EHRC, 2011, p.8).

The variety of terms used in relation to the behaviour found in the current case study (and that of Pilkington) have a lot in common and bring with them a range of potential responses, powers and laws. As the above quote intimates, meaningful terminology matters because it helps to inform recognition of what is happening and channel the appropriate response. What follows is an illustration of how current recognition and understanding of this sort of targeted group behaviour is not sufficiently developed; and how existing powers and laws are not used to good effect.

The current case and that of Pilkington, share a number of things in common: both involved the targeting of families in which a child had a disability and both occurred in areas of social housing. Other parallels include desperate actions within the families targeted: attempted suicide in our case study and the deaths of Fiona Pilkington and her daughter. However, the conclusion to the current case is more positive because of the extraordinary energy of Asher; which has included countless efforts to inform those in power (See for example Astrup, 2010) as well as television appearances (BBC, 2009; ITV, 2011) and other contributions in the media (Henderson, 2012). This article is an attempt to tell this story in another forum. The idea for this article developed after the authors met through participation in a BBC Radio Solent programme on February 7<sup>th</sup> 2011, which was set up to discuss new proposals to respond to ASB.

### **Asher's story**

This next section is based on a collaboration in which Asher supplied all the evidence and Carol led the draft of the narrative, which was in turn reviewed by Asher. Data collated in this case study includes an in-depth interview with Asher, documentary evidence on her case (including an independent review by the Home Office completed in 2010), numerous media

reports and a selection of recordings, including CCTV footage. These documents, including the Home Office review, confirm the key aspects of Asher's story, which follows.

### *It started with a kick*

Problems developed in the first few weeks when Asher moved into her home in May 2006. Local children had been used to coming in and out of her garden to play football. An elderly woman had lived there previously and had been unable to stop them coming into the garden. Asher's next door neighbour, who had five children, described the house as a 'honey pot' for a large number of local children who had been used to playing football in the immediate area (and in what was now Asher's garden). After some rough play involving her younger son (who was 8 at the time) Asher asked the boys to leave her garden and they became abusive (see the quote below). Other problems centred on her car, with young people sitting on the bonnet and kicking a football around and at the car. They were asked not to sit on the car and not to kick a football at the car. Asher describes the situation, and their response, in the following way:

“The boys were all into football but they would have no respect, they would just whack their football at your car and not say sorry, whack it in the garden, this was how it all started off for me. .... There would be massive groups, about 17 at a time,.....and they were all very, very hostile. Very hostile. They'd look you up and down, wouldn't say hello, almost like sussing you out all the time..... And then, the kids would sit on the car..... I'd say 'you're... sitting on my car bonnet, right in the centre of the bonnet', and I would say 'can you get off my car, please?' And they'd go... 'fuck off'. ....as I was getting [older son, who has Cerebral Palsy] in the car they'd whack a football at the car as I was carrying him, and laugh. So it was starting to get a bit sinister. And then carers would say 'they've started gobbing on my car, they've started denting my car', so they started specifically targeting carers. One carer resigned, so that started causing problems..... I said 'until you lot can learn to play football properly and stop hitting people deliberately, I'm taking your football in.' And it just went: whoosh, and they exposed themselves, they got their willies out, they said, 'suck on this, bitch', the boy next door went mental ..... He said, 'I'm going to f-ing get a knife, I'm going to f-ing stab you, you f-ing bitch'. .... then he just went wild. He was about 13 at the time.”

The large size of the group of children and young teenagers reversed the more usual power relations between adults and children so that the children had the power to intimidate Asher and her family. It is often suggested that if adults intervened more it may be possible to restore the civilities of a by-gone era. But for adults to intervene there has to be some level of consensus about appropriate behaviour in a locality, and/or others who will back up any challenges. In a sense Asher's intervention challenged existing power relations and was based on mainstream assumptions that were not shared by her next door neighbour who was an established and powerful figure with numerous relatives in the locality. The Pilkington case was reported to have started with a similar relatively minor incident, involving a fall out between her younger son (also aged 8 at the time) and the son of a neighbour (Dolan, 2009).

There is also a gendered angle to the power relations illustrated in the language used in the above quote, in which Asher is specifically abused as a woman. The abuse used against

Francesca (Fiona Pilkington's daughter, referred to as 'Frankie' in a quote below) was similarly gendered, in addition specifically picking on her disability.

### *Escalation, eviction and the victim becomes the prisoner*

This verbally abusive and threatening situation then evolved into criminal acts of vandalism, criminal damage, theft and assault. Large groups of young people followed Asher and her younger son around the area if they left the house on foot. Asher was not the only person victimised on this estate; it is well documented that there was a wider context of intimidation by a small group of inter-connected families in which local animals had been killed and dismembered (BBC, 2009). After the family next door to Asher was evicted the anti-social behaviour quickly resumed:

“....So we got them evicted in 2007, three days after they got evicted they came back, targeted all the key witnesses that had gone to court, bricks through windows, pets stolen, rabbits mutilated, grass put on people's windows, tyres cut, tyres slashed, and then we went back to court again.”

Eviction is one of the more severe responses to ASB and is given great prominence in responding to the issue. However, evicted families have to go somewhere and in provincial Britain that may not be very far away. In this case eviction only inflamed the situation further, justifying the hate that went with the ASB. Arguably, her next door neighbour and children literally had significantly less or - as we tend to say - 'nothing' to lose'. They had no work and they had lost their home. Attempts were made to evict one of the families involved in the Pilkington case, although in that case it was not successful (Dolan, 2009).

### *The ironic unintended tyranny of simple target hardening*

Moving away is perhaps a more immediate response for people who don't want to stay and fight and/or have the choice to end their victimisation by getting away from it. Asher did not have the resources to move her family and in any case her son needed the specific adaptations to their house in order to be able to live at home. This was an important part of their situation:

“I was a problem for the council because they had nowhere to move me. They spent £40,000 adapting the house, and they were like, there are no other houses available we can move you [to].”

So instead the focus was shifted to trying to make the house safer from attack. This 'target hardening' in effect made Asher feel like a prisoner within her home:

“.... what in the end happened was we had anti-climb paint. We had CCTV put up. We had a solar light put up... a floodlight put up. We had laminated glass, gates put up by a charity (not the council) panic alarms ....., the letterbox was sealed. So they tried to do everything they could to keep us so-called safe, but actually never sorted out the problem. So as soon as we were going out on the estate was when we had problems with the abuse.”

Fiona Pilkington and her family were described by neighbours as ‘virtual prisoners’ in their home (Bird, 2007) because as soon as they went out they were abused and taunted. One neighbour was quoted as saying: ‘Frankie was always at the window, waving and saying hello to passers-by, but the lads just used to hurl abuse at her. She never came into the street and was usually either in the front room or the garden in her pyjamas. They would just call her a disabled bitch’ (Bird, 2007, paras 13-14).

For Asher and her family, after the initial reaction to the eviction there was a relatively quiet period for a few months in 2007, but then the perpetrators came back in early 2008:

“So then it went reasonably quiet for about six months, and then it all started again in January 2008, and it was quite sneaky then. It wasn’t so much... it was lots of things like following my other son round the estate, throwing stones at him every time he went out, big groups of them would follow him. They followed me when I walked the dogs. Quite a lot of real intimidation. The kids... one of the kiddies would stand at the end of my driveway with his mates every time I came out to the drive, put his fingers up, I’d get called ‘f-ing grass’, and that’s when it started to go really bad with the authorities, that’s when the whole thing started to go bad with the police and the council. Because by this time I was so sick of it, I was going back to the council and the police saying, ‘they’re back again, please do something’. And the attitude I got was basically, nothing, ‘we can’t do any more’. They said ‘we have no powers to ban the children from the estate. If it’s hard, if the odd stare is hard to deal with, please turn the other cheek’. So it’s a real attitude coming from the authorities. And that was, I would say, if I’m really honest, the most painful thing for us has not been the abuse, we can put up with the abuse, the worst thing for us has been the way the authorities have treated us, and their complete contempt, and their almost anger that we dare to challenge them.”

This last quote encapsulates a key problem for victimised families who cannot readily move away from the situation. If eviction does not change the dynamic and if local agencies do not have the will (or knowledge) of how to tackle the situation, the victim can be perceived as ‘the problem’. The latter situation might be seen as a classic case of ‘victim blaming’. Victim blaming by the authorities people look to for help has been noted in other similar cases (Walker, 2011).

Indeed the attempted suicide of her younger son led to the involvement of Social Services and a focus on Asher’s parenting. Asher describes the situation in the following way:

“by that time [when her son attempted suicide], we’d been failed by the council, everyone was failing us all the way along, starting to blame us for what was happening, started to blame me for my parenting of my younger son who wanted to commit suicide, so Social Services started to get involved..... Social Services took the view that there must be something going on in the family, this child wants to kill himself, it must be a parent. And that was really... that was a really... that was almost too much to bear.”

The independent report for the Home Office acknowledged that Asher’s ‘*constant battle for action with the authorities led to her being painted as antagonistic*’ (Morton, 2010). The report also found 22 failings in the case, noting that there were multiple missed opportunities to act.

### ***Moral messaging: how the media saved our lives***

As noted earlier there has been a great deal of media coverage of Asher's case, perhaps in part because of the parallels with the Pilkington case and Asher's willingness to speak out. Indeed, Asher believes that she had no alternative but to involve the media in order to get any serious attention focused on her situation and the problems on her estate:

“The media to us probably, I would say, seriously saved our lives, by getting them involved. Because if we hadn't, I think we would have been exactly like Fiona Pilkington, I really do. I know that's a really scary statement to make..”

Asher also acknowledges that this media attention created other problems both in her relationship with local agencies and with particular neighbours.

On the other hand Asher's appearances on television led to positive developments; some children began to understand the nature of the situation in which they had participated (see also Daily Echo, 2010):

“I've now had five kiddies say they're sorry. One kiddie... and this is what's very interesting, one kiddie saw me on TV ages ago and his mum and dad had no idea he was involved with it, and this kiddie apparently started going really embarrassed and getting upset when he was watching the story. And his dad said, 'you hang around with [name of key participant]. Hope you've not been involved in all this!' And this kiddie apparently just started crying and said 'yeah, I threw eggs at her window and I put stones through and everything'. Now that family went straight down the police that night, took the son down there, and said, 'our son has been involved with this lady on telly, we want to go and see her, we want to say how sorry we are'. Now that was the most amazing RJ [Restorative Justice] session ever, because that kiddie, as he came in my house, he was crying...”

In other words there seems to be some substance to the view that some children do not necessarily fully understand what they are doing when they get involved in group behaviour of the sort experienced by Asher and her family. Some possibly felt they had to join in, others may have been bystanders. It is well established in research on bullying that there are bystanders as well as participants (Salmivalli *et al*, 1996) and that bystanders can be enlisted as helpers and supporters of victims.

### ***What should have happened?***

Hodgkinson and Tilley (2007) acknowledge, in relation to ASB, that whilst there is widespread recognition that '*something must be done, there is little consensus about how we go about tackling this problem*' (p.399). They categorise potential responses that range through situational measures (such as CCTV), social measures (such as diversionary activities for young people) and multi-faceted risk based interventions (such as 'Communities that Care) and work with families in danger of being evicted.

Despite this long period of being the target of ASB, Asher supports the notion of working with families in danger of being evicted. She believes that skilled intervention in the form of

mediation or Restorative Justice might have been able to diffuse tensions before her neighbour was evicted. She identified a key point when this could have happened:

“I actually said to [the neighbour], I said [the neighbour], this is ridiculous. Let’s have coffee and sit down and talk about it. And she went, ‘fuck off, I ain’t talking to you’. And that was to me, that was a point then, if the council and the police had said, and sat her down and said ‘right, you are going to be evicted, this, this is going to happen, let’s get to mediation, let’s try and sort it out’, there could maybe have been some way forward.”

Asher’s neighbour had five children and a husband in and out of prison when she was evicted from her home, she clearly had plenty of her own problems. Whether or not she would have responded to skilled conflict resolution we don’t know, she wasn’t given the chance. The motivation for her behaviour is unclear, except for documented comments about the amount of help Asher had in comparison with herself (Sunday Times, 2009). So whilst the behaviour of Asher’s neighbour does not appear to have been specifically motivated by prejudice against disability; it was at least partly due to the difference in apparent circumstances of Asher’s family (much of it because of the help associated with her son’s disability) and the neighbour’s family that helped fuel the on-going victimisation. To repeat the point already made, her son’s disability and associated housing adaptation needs, was crucial to Asher’s difficulty in moving out and will inevitably have heightened her fears around the everyday victimisations, such as items thrown at her when she was carrying her son into the car. Furthermore, damage to the car meant further difficulties in transporting her son, as well as additional barriers to doing paid work. The targeting of carers meant that some of them resigned their role, increasing the pressures on Asher further. The effects of all this on Asher’s younger son and the response of Social Services to the attempted suicide compounded the situation.

Whether perpetrators (particularly children) of ASB understand what they are doing and want to make amends are important questions to be considered, if conflict resolution and empowerment of residents is to be part of the solution in situations like this. A member of the family of one of the key perpetrators in Asher’s case posted the following comment online, suggesting no remorse and some irritation at Asher’s public profile, as well as comparison between the two families, implying they (the perpetrators) have more to deal with than Asher:

Asher should not of done this it is all because of that poor woman [Fiona Pilkington] and she has got to poke her nose in every time antisocial behaviour is said in the news or paper. She knows what she is doing and she wants a reaction from us but she ain’t going to get one so I suggest she just leaves it all alone and gets on with her life and looks after her boys properly. She moans all the time that it’s hard having 2 try having 5 children and a single parent (Sunday Times, 2009, para 27).

An apparent lack of concern or understanding was also reported in the Pilkington case: ‘*Even as news of their deaths spread, youths were seen clambering over the garden fence at Ms Pilkington’s home and running around in the garden*’ (Bird, 2007, para 20). Two years after her death little change was reported in the behaviour of young people in the area in which she lived (Dolan, 2009). Asher is more positive and also had direct experience of people genuinely apologising for what they had done (see later).

Hodgkinson and Tilley (2007) note the difficulty in effecting a change in the level of ASB when the focus has been on enforcement; rather than action to address the behaviour involved; such as empowering and supporting residents, as well as various situational measures to prevent and reduce the impact. To counter ASB, Mackenzie *et al* (2010) focus on public reassurance initiatives and environmental interventions in the short-term; but recognise that in the longer term action is needed to address the concentration of socio-economic deprivation and crime in particular localities, as well as to build community cohesion and trust.

Government proposals on addressing ASB (ACPO/Home Office, 2012) at the time of writing, emphasise the need to focus on harm to the victim or community, rather than categorising the behaviour itself. Key to this focus is better recording and sharing of data on reported incidents, better risk assessment of cases, as well as more involvement of the community in addressing the problems in their area. These latter actions make sense but must be considered alongside social housing policy which, as we have argued earlier, helps to recreate the conditions where ASB is likely to be a significant problem.

### **Conclusions and the rational way forward for social housing policy and policing**

So what are we to learn from a case like this? There are four key policy and practice points. Firstly, the bigger picture: policies that are likely to further concentrate disadvantage and vulnerability spatially will help fuel the conditions in which ASB thrives. For example, under The Localism Act 2011 new social housing tenants will have to re-apply for the right to stay in their home after two years (LGA, 2011). This will mean that tenants who improve their circumstances will have to move out, increasing the concentration of marginalised groups in social housing. This is in turn likely to further accentuate the dangerous combination of vulnerable people and those with nothing to lose in social housing. For a minority, this can mean that participating in ASB is both entertainment and a source of power and status, when they have very little of either. Secondly, it is clear that a better understanding is needed of how to assess and respond to the particular vulnerabilities of families that include a person with disabilities. Indeed this assessment should have been made *before* Asher and her family were housed where they were. However we label the behaviour targeted at Asher and her family, it was clearly criminal at times and was also extremely dangerous; it could have ended in tragedy (as in the Pilkington case). Thirdly, multiple calls to the police from a single address must be better interpreted in relation to the dynamics of the situation behind them, so that there can be an appropriate understanding and response. There are moves (noted earlier) to address multiple calls from the same address and better risk assessment of these situations in ACPO/Home Office (2012) trials. Fourthly, target hardening property in an effort to reduce crime, without regard for the strength of offender motivation, is based upon the irrational premise that the Routine Activity Theory (Felson, 2002; Felson and Boba, 2010) notion of crime ‘opportunity’ is not only a cause, but also the most important cause of crime (Felson and Clarke, 1998; Tilley and Laycock, 2002), which is a pervasive and pathological myth influencing both policy and scholarly study in the UK and USA that has been criticized as being underpinned by the irrational premise that ultimately all successfully completed crimes cause themselves to happen, as does every attempt that ends in failure (Sutton, 2012).

Despite the allure of the compelling simplicity of Crime Opportunity Theory for crime reduction policy making and policing, motivation to offend cannot be taken as existing equally for all individuals (Cohen and Felson, 1979, p.604; Clarke and Felson, 1993, p.2; Jeffrey and Zahm, 1993, p.42), arguably much less so for general hate crimes and in

particular for ASB directed at those with disabilities. Therefore, target hardening the homes and other property of victims should be just one amongst a range of other equally important measures that need to be simultaneously implemented in order to protect victims from immediate harm.

There is a greater focus on harm and victimisation underpinning policy developments on ASB, at the time of writing. However, the deprivation, disadvantage, anger and resentment that can be found in some residents of social housing are crucial motivational drivers in the generation of ASB; an issue that is not given adequate official attention.

Asher would agree with most of the commentary on ASB: the perpetrators clearly have their own problems, but, to date, the various methods used to respond to ASB don't address the causes that influence offender motivation, and how these affect potential offender and active offender perceptions of their potential and actual targets. Further in-depth research with both victims, and in particular with offenders, is required to identify the complex causes of ASB and hate crimes directed at those with disabilities if we are to identify more promising crime reduction and policing methods to effectively reduce its prevalence and better tackle its incidence.

## Notes

- (1) SCOPE is a charity that supports disabled people and their families. See, <http://www.scope.org.uk/>

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